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The Skate

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NANCY VIEIRA COUTO

The Skate

Crossing the Delaware
Christmas, 1838

What she has gotten herself into is a boat
full of women terrified of shimmying
over the wrong state of the right element,
the sailors who will push them half enjoying
the crush of flounces, the loosely corseted

hysteria, as they surround the craft
and bump it off the ice-caked Jersey bank
and skate it on its keel across the frozen
surface, whose pocks and fissures and
upthrusts simulate, at first,

the chaos of a storm at sea, the small
boat tossed and jerked over the sill
of panic, the ladies unlacing
swells of vowels as they near the pure,
stilled middle. They are skating

on glass, they are skating on nothing
more solid than the shimmer of their own
inexpressible longings, gliding
at the speed of pure pleasure, all the petals
of the compass blown and gone, gravity gone,

gone from the counted cross-stitch of their souls,
and they are skating, and they are suddenly
shy with one another, widows, wives,
and virgins averting dreamy gazes,
geranium cheeks, curly wisps escaping

from under hoods and bonnets, and she,
most of all, is shy as she skates
the unconfessed glissades of her insatiable
desire. There is only this
skate of a boat in motion, and motion,

and the physicality of motion,
this space for it, this current gone glaze
separating “here” from *here*. Meanwhile, the
gentlemen are hoofing it. Such a
vaudeville of tentative thrusts with sticks

and umbrellas, such steps, missteps, and dust-
me-ups! At last safe on land, they muster
wagons and make their way by Front Street,
the ladies squared as boxes and as mum
as if nothing had happened.